

Handlers, Equipment Cleaners, Helpers, and Laborers

(O*NET 93956, 93997, 93998, 93999, 97805, 97808, 98102, 98311, 98312, 98313, 98314, 98315, 98319, 98323, 98502, 98702, 98705, 98799A, 98799B, 98902A, 98905, 98999A, and 98999B)

Significant Points

- Job openings should be numerous because the occupation is very large and turnover is relatively high.
- Most jobs require no work experience or specific training, but earnings are low.

Nature of the Work

Employers in almost all industries hire entry level workers to do tasks requiring little training, or to assist more skilled production, construction, operating, and maintenance workers. These entry level workers perform a broad array of material mover, helper, or laborer jobs, ranging from moving boxes and feeding machines, to cleaning equipment and work areas. Many do tasks that are needed to make the work of more skilled employees flow smoothly. Handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers often do routine physical work under close supervision. They generally follow oral or written instructions from supervisors or more experienced workers, and have little opportunity to make decisions. To perform their jobs effectively, helpers and laborers must be familiar with the duties of the workers they help, as well as with the materials, tools, and machinery they use.

Freight, stock, and material hand movers move materials to and from storage and production areas, loading docks, delivery vehicles, ships, and containers. They move materials either manually, or with forklifts, dollies, handtrucks, or carts. Their specific duties vary by industry and work setting. Specialized workers within this group include stevedores, who load and unload ships; baggage and cargo handlers, who work in transportation industries; and furniture movers. In factories, they may move raw materials, components, and finished goods between loading docks, storage areas, and work areas. They receive and sort materials and supplies and prepare them according to work orders for delivery to work or storage areas.

Hand packers and *packagers* manually pack, package or wrap a variety of materials. They may inspect items for defects, label cartons, stamp information on products, keep records of items packed, and stack packages on loading docks. This group also includes order fillers, who pack materials for shipment, as well as grocery store courtesy clerks. In grocery stores, they may bag groceries, carry packages to customers' cars, and return shopping carts to designated areas.

Machine feeders and *offbearers* feed materials into or remove materials from automatic equipment or machines tended by other workers.

Service station attendants fill fuel tanks and wash windshields on automobiles, buses, trucks, and other vehicles. They may perform simple service and repair tasks under the direction of a mechanic, such as change oil, repair tires, and replace belts, lights, windshield wipers, and other accessories. They may also collect payment for services and supplies.

Refuse and recyclable material collectors gather trash, garbage, and recyclables from homes and businesses along a regularly scheduled route, and deposit the refuse in their truck for transport to a dump, landfill, or recycling center. They lift and empty garbage cans or recycling bins by hand, or operate a hydraulic lift truck that picks up and empties dumpsters.

Vehicle washers and *equipment cleaners* clean machinery, vehicles, storage tanks, pipelines, and similar equipment using water and other

cleaning agents, vacuums, hoses, brushes, cloths, and other cleaning equipment.

Parking lot attendants assist customers in parking their cars in lots or storage areas and collect fees from customers.

Helpers assist skilled construction trades workers, mechanics and repairers, and workers in production and extractive occupations. (Statements on these occupations appear elsewhere in the *Handbook*.) They aid machine operators and tenders by moving materials, supplies, and tools to and from work areas. Some may tend machines if an operator is not available. Helpers may sort finished products, keep records of machine processes, report malfunctions to operators, and clean machinery after use. Mechanics' helpers assist mechanics and service technicians who repair motor vehicles, industrial machinery, and electrical, electronic, and other equipment. They may fetch tools, materials, and supplies; hold materials or tools; take apart defective equipment; remove rivets; prepare replacement parts; or clean work areas. Construction trades' helpers carry tools, materials, and equipment to carpenters, electricians, plasterers, masons, painters, plumbers, roofers, and other construction trades workers.



Freight, stock, and material movers handle a variety of materials, including furniture.

Construction craft laborers are skilled workers who provide much of the physically demanding labor at construction projects, tunnel and shaft excavations, hazardous waste removal projects, and demolition sites. They clean and prepare sites, dig trenches, mix and place concrete, and set braces to support the sides of excavations. At hazardous waste removal projects, they perform material and atmospheric sampling; build, clean, and decontaminate enclosure structures; and package and transport hazardous materials. Other highly specialized tasks include operating laser guidance equipment to place pipes, and setting explosives for tunnel, shaft, and road construction. In addition to these duties, construction craft laborers may assist other craft workers.

Construction craft laborers operate a variety of equipment including pavement breakers; jackhammers; earth tampers; concrete, mortar, and plaster mixers; guided boring machines; small mechanical hoists; laser beam equipment; and surveying and measuring equipment.

Working Conditions

Most handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers do repetitive, physically demanding work. They may lift and carry heavy objects, and stoop, kneel, crouch, or crawl in awkward positions. Some work at great heights, or outdoors in all weather conditions. Some jobs expose workers to harmful materials or chemicals, fumes, odors, loud noise, or dangerous machinery. To avoid injury, these employees wear safety clothing, such as gloves and hard hats, and devices to protect their eyes, mouth, or hearing.

Handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers generally work 8-hour shifts, though longer shifts are also common. In many industries, handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers work evening or “graveyard” shifts. Service station and parking lot attendants may work at night because these establishments may be open at all hours; handlers in grocery stores may stock shelves at night when stores are closed. Refuse and recyclable material collectors often work early morning shifts, starting at 5:00 or 6:00. Construction helpers and construction craft laborers may only work during certain seasons, when the weather permits construction activity.

Employment

Handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers held about 5.1 million jobs in 1998. Their employment was distributed among the following detailed occupations:

Hand packers and packagers	984,000
Freight, stock, and material movers, hand	822,000
Helpers, construction trades	576,000
Cleaners of vehicles and equipment	288,000
Machine feeders and offbearers	213,000
Service station attendants	141,000
Refuse and recyclable materials collectors	99,000
Parking lot attendants	86,000
All other helpers, laborers, and material movers, hand.....	1,934,000

Handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers are employed throughout the country in virtually all industries, with the greatest numbers concentrated in manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, and personnel supply services. Nearly 1 out of 4 works part time. A growing number are employed on a temporary or contract basis, many through firms providing personnel supply services. For example, companies that only need a laborer for a few days to move materials or clean up a site may contract with temporary help agencies specializing in providing this type of worker on a short-term basis.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

For most handler, equipment cleaner, helper, and laborer jobs, employers hire people without work experience or specific training. Some require a high school diploma, while others do not. Most employers, however, require workers to be at least 18 years old and physically able to perform the work. For those jobs requiring physical exertion, employers may

require that applicants pass a physical exam. Some employers also require drug testing or background checks prior to employment. These workers are often younger than workers in other occupations—reflecting the limited training but significant physical requirements of many of these jobs.

For all of these jobs, employers look for people who are reliable and hard working. For those jobs that involve dealing with the public, such as grocery store helpers and service station or parking lot attendants, workers should be pleasant and courteous. Most jobs require reading and basic mathematics skills to read procedures manuals, billing, and other documents, and to collect payment for services from customers.

Handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers generally learn skills informally, on the job from more experienced workers or supervisors. However, workers who use dangerous equipment or handle toxic chemicals usually receive specialized training in safety awareness and procedures.

Formal apprenticeship programs provide more thorough preparation for jobs as construction craft laborers. Local apprenticeship programs are operated under guidelines established by the Laborers-Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) Education and Training Fund. Programs include at least 4,000 hours of on-the job training, with 144 hours of classroom training. Most union contractors and laborer unions require some training before an apprentice is placed on the job. Apprentices are instructed in the correct use of numerous tools and equipment that must be mastered before they complete the program.

Experience in many of these jobs may allow workers to qualify or become trainees for other skilled positions as construction trades workers, machine operators, assemblers, or other production workers; transportation, material moving equipment, or vehicle operators; or mechanics or repairers. In fact, many employers prefer to promote qualified handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers as openings arise. Some may eventually advance to become supervisors.

Job Outlook

Employment of handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2008. Job openings should be numerous because the occupation is very large and turnover is relatively high—characteristic of occupations requiring little formal training. Many openings will arise from the need to replace workers who retire, transfer to other occupations, or who leave the labor force for other reasons.

Projected employment growth varies by detailed occupation. Among service station attendants and machine feeders and offbearers, employment is expected to decline slightly. Employment of freight, stock, and other material hand movers is expected to experience little change. Slower-than-average growth is expected for refuse and recyclable materials collectors and construction trades helpers. Finally, driven largely by rapid growth in the industries in which they are most concentrated, faster-than-average growth is expected for vehicle washers and equipment cleaners, hand packers and packagers, and parking lot attendants.

Overall, demand for handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers depends not only on growth in the industries employing these workers, but also on growth among the skilled workers whom they assist. Slower-than-average growth among construction trades helpers, for example, is directly related to expectations of employment growth among construction trades workers. However, growth of helper and construction craft laborer employment will be spurred by continuing emphasis on hazardous waste cleanup and other environmental projects, and on rebuilding infrastructure—roads, bridges, tunnels, and communications facilities, for example.

Employment growth will also be affected by automation. Some of these jobs are repetitive and, therefore, easily replaced by new machines and equipment that improve productivity and quality control. Automated ticketing equipment, for example, reduces the need for parking lot attendants to issue tickets by hand. Some helper, handler, and hand packer and packaging jobs will be eliminated by automated material handling equipment, such as conveyor belts and computer-controlled

lift mechanisms, and machines that automatically load, unload, and package materials. As more skilled jobs, such as those of assemblers, become automated, demand for these types of employees who assist them will decline.

Many employers have also begun combining job responsibilities or contracting out labor. Job combinations may lead to displacement of handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers because their tasks may be assumed by more highly skilled workers. In other cases, a helper may assist more than one type of worker, reducing the number of helpers needed. In addition, these occupations may increasingly be staffed by contingent workers as more employers turn to hiring temporary handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers.

Earnings

Median hourly earnings of hand packers and packagers in 1998 were \$6.99. The middle 50 percent earned between \$5.90 and \$8.65 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$5.54 an hour; the highest 10 percent earned more than \$10.74. Median hourly earnings in 1997 in the industries employing the largest numbers of hand packers and packagers are shown below:

Meat products	\$8.20
Miscellaneous plastics products, not elsewhere classified	8.00
Miscellaneous business services	6.80
Personnel supply services	6.40
Grocery stores	5.70

In 1998, median hourly earnings were \$8.88 for freight, stock, and material movers, hand. The middle 50 percent earned between \$7.09 and \$11.23 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$5.99 an hour; the highest 10 percent earned more than \$14.79.

Median hourly earnings of construction trades helpers were \$9.38 in 1998. The middle 50 percent earned between \$7.50 and \$11.49 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6.34 an hour; the highest 10 percent earned more than \$15.68.

Median hourly earnings for other handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers in 1998 are shown below:

Refuse and recyclable material collectors	\$10.51
Machine feeders and offbearers	9.04
Cleaners of vehicles and equipment	6.99
Service station attendants	6.90
Parking lot attendants	6.69

Construction craft laborers generally have higher weekly earnings than other workers in this group. However, they may be more likely to lose work time because of bad weather and the cyclical nature of construction work.

About 1 in 5 handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers are members of a union. Many belong to the Laborers' International Union of North America.

Related Occupations

Other entry level workers who perform mostly physical work include roustabouts in the oil industry, certain timber cutting and logging occupations, and groundskeepers. The jobs of handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers are often similar to those of the more experienced workers they assist, including machine operators, construction craft workers, assemblers, mechanics, and repairers.

Sources of Additional Information

For information about jobs as handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers, contact local building or construction contractors, manufacturers, and wholesale and retail establishments, or the local office of the State employment service.

For general information about the work of construction craft laborers, contact:

☛ Laborers' International Union of North America, 905 16th St. NW., Washington, DC 20006. Internet: <http://www.liuna.org>

For general information about the work of vehicle cleaners, contact:

☛ International Carwash Association, 401 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611. Internet: <http://www.carwashes.com>